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CVS SITE PARKING - A SUMMARY

Until 1985, the CVS site was occupied by Louis' Foods, a family-run supermarket that served as the principal anchor store for downtown Amherst. Its parking lot was the largest, most central private lot in downtown Amherst, and was well known to most Amherst residents. The many Amherst citizen boards, committees and consultants who have studied the issue of downtown parking have consistently considered the CVS (former Louis') lot as an important potential site for a downtown parking structure.

1977 - The Parking Report of the Town Planner's Office recommends that the Town "explore the possibility of one or more parking decks (1-2 stories) at these potential locations: behind Louis' Foods, Town Hall, Amherst Savings Bank."

1984 - Town Center Task Force Final Report - The Town Center Task Force effort was spurred by a zoning request which would have allowed Louis' Foods to move out of the downtown, to University Drive (current Victory Supermarket location).

The potential loss of Louis' Foods and several other major downtown changes led to the formation of the Town Center Task Force. The Task Force's Final Report includes the following discussion and recommendations:

"There is disagreement as to the extent of the shortage of parking in the CBD [Central Business District]; different criteria yield differing deficit figures. But there is no question that there is a deficit, and a substantial one at that. This is not new wisdom in Town. Earlier studies have reached the same conclusion. The Task Force urges the Town to take concrete actions to begin to address the problem. . . ."

"c. proceed with all deliberate speed to plan and construct central parking structure(s) in the CBD. In pursuit of the goal of improved parking in the CBD, the Task Force unanimously favors Town acquisition of the land underneath the current parking spaces behind Louis' Foods. If a negotiated sale is possible, fine; if not, the Town must be prepared to invoke eminent domain. To be included in the acquisition is the right of way joining the parking lot and North Pleasant Street. This site is a natural one for the construction of a two-tiered parking structure; but even in the absence of specific plans for such a building, the space is of enormous value to the Town as one of the few suitable parking lot sites in the CBD."

October 1984 - The October 29, 1984 Town Meeting authorizes the Select Board to acquire all land associated with the former Louis' lot (exclusive of buildings), including the entrance driveway, and authorizes \$825,000 in borrowing authority for land purchase, surveys and related costs.

[NOTE: On June 30, 1989, the Town used this eminent domain authority to purchase a 29,620 square foot parcel (the current Town lot) from Richard Vincent in a negotiated "friendly taking." The purchase cost \$485,000. The remaining \$340,000 in borrowing capacity was later refinanced at a cost of \$42,000, leaving a current borrowing capacity of \$298,000.]

May 1986 - Report on Downtown Parking Facilities, Downtown Subcommittee, Amherst Planning Board - Trying to spur action on the 1984 Town Center Task Force Final Report recommendations, the Downtown Subcommittee of the Planning Board reviewed the status of previous Town parking recommendations and made its own. The Subcommittee's report included the following:

"Parking needs should be met by the development of appropriately sited and constructed parking facilities which provide more parking in less space - parking decks and garages."

"The most appropriate sites for such parking facilities have already been identified in previous parking studies and are well known: [the Boltwood, Amity, former Louis' lot, Pray Street lot and Town Hall lot are then listed]."

Parking facilities will be needed on each of these sites to meet the current parking deficit and future parking demands. Since it will not be feasible to develop them all simultaneously, they must be assigned priority and sequence based on their characteristics - size (potential net gain in spaces), location (proximity to stores and services), and development pressure."

"The three largest sites should be developed in the following priority and sequence - Boltwood, Amity and Louis'". The Louis' lot is the largest and arguably the easiest to develop but, as a result of the Town meeting action [to authorize eminent domain on the site], it is not under significant private development pressure. It is unlikely to be lost as an opportunity for public parking. This is not the case for the other two sites."

1986-90 - Parking Task Force - The Parking Task Force was created by the Select Board in October 1986, in response to the May 1986 Downtown Subcommittee report and recommendations from the Finance Director and Town Manager. The Task Force was charged "to recommend for action: 1) suitable site(s) for parking facilities; 2) the physical features of such facility or facilities; 3) the best form of ownership; and 4) financing."

Parking Task Force (cont.)

The Task Force worked with the Planning Department, interviewed New England area parking professionals to assess downtown parking garage issues, and hired Arrowstreet, Inc. of Somerville, Massachusetts, to head a team of traffic, parking, architecture, landscape design and financial feasibility consultants.

September 1987 - The Jones Library Board of Trustees send a letter to the Task Force, advocating the CVS site:

"The Jones Library Trustees would like to go on record as favoring the development of the former Louis' lot as the site for a parking garage, if such a facility is going to be built anywhere in downtown Amherst.

The Louis' lot has long been considered the prime central downtown parking area. The construction of a garage on this site would be a logical extension of its present use. Hidden behind street facades, a parking structure here would have the least impact on the aesthetic quality of downtown Amherst.

We are vehemently opposed to the construction of a parking garage on the Amity Street lot, from the point of view of aesthetics as well as from the problem of traffic control. . . . we feel such a structure should not face the front door of the Jones Library, a building which most feel is an architectural delight."

"Library patrons carrying books and records would not be well served by a parking facility in the area of the Bangs Center [Boltwood Walk]. If the town decides to use the Bangs area site for a parking garage, we urge you to retain adequate public parking closer to the library."

November 1988 - The Task Force holds a major public design exercise (charrette) to identify potential problems and opportunities for parking structures at each of the three largest downtown sites--CVS, Boltwood and Amity.

January 1989 - Amherst Parking Study, Report: Phase 1 - Arrowstreet submits its initial report evaluating the three sites, assessing the downtown parking system, and examining the financial feasibility of a parking garage.

August 1989 - Preliminary Report & Recommendations to the Select Board - After review of the Phase 1 report and further analysis, the Task Force submits its own preliminary report. That report includes the following abbreviated recommendation:

"Recommend CVS lot as preferred parking facility site, for the following reasons --highly central, good vehicular access, least visually intrusive, existing eminent domain authority, fewest conflicts in terms of other appropriate uses for the site, serves a major Town facility (Jones Library), will best serve the expected future commercial growth pattern to the north and is probably the least expensive site to develop."

Parking Task Force (cont.)

September 11, 1989 - Select Board Meeting - The Task Force and consultant present their findings to the Select Board. The minutes of the meeting include the following:

"Jim Batchelor, representing the Town's consulting firm of Arrowstreet . . . discussed the three sites (CVS lot, Amity Street, and Boltwood Walk), noting that the CVS site can accommodate 257 cars in a continuous ramp-type facility which has the advantage of being accessible to vehicular traffic. Any facility located on Amity Street would need a facade [commercial storefronts] due to its location across from the Jones Library; Arrowstreet would recommend street-level shops be incorporated into the [Amity] garage. There are problem[s] with the Boltwood Walk site regarding siting and water table concerns." [After further discussion, the matter was tabled until the next meeting.]

September 18, 1989 - Select Board Meeting - The Task Force again meets with the Select Board. The minutes are as follows:

"Mr. Rice stated that he felt the Parking Task Force should not go on to the next step [preliminary designs], noting that the CVS lot will become 'the' plan to use, and staff and the Parking Task Force will not consider any other site. He further commented that he felt the Town should approach the owners of the other two sites (Amity Street and Boltwood Walk) and express an interest in them as they can disappear. VOTED 4-1-0 (Rice opposed) to recommend that the Parking Task Force proceed to the next step of its charge. VOTED unanimously to encourage the manager to seek ways to explore the feasibility of developing the Amity Street lot as a high priority without spending additional funds."

January 29, 1990 - Amherst Parking Facilities Study, Final Report - Arrowstreet submits a preliminary design and cost estimate for a parking garage on the CVS site. The preliminary design would provide a total of 268 parking spaces (251 spaces in the garage, 17 on site)--a net gain of 151 parking spaces. Construction costs are estimated at slightly over \$2.9 million (not counting remaining land acquisition).

With no state or federal funding available to underwrite garage construction, the Town does not proceed to "design development"--designer selection, final engineering, construction and site plans, and construction bid documents. The preliminary design is filed until funding can be obtained.

1992 - Downtown Action Plan - The Town/Commercial Relations Committee and Planning Board conduct an extensive 1 year community planning process. The resulting Downtown Action Plan recommends many specific downtown actions, including that the Town "proceed with the design development phase of the CVS parking facility," so the project will be ready to go when state or federal parking funds become available.

Parking Task Force (cont.)

August 1993 - Parking Commission Created - Responding to the Downtown Action Plan, the Select Board creates the Parking Commission to advise on "the planning, operation and management of the downtown on-street and off-street parking system."

1994-95 - Central Meter Machine - The Parking Commission recommends purchase and installation of a central meter machine to serve the 69 parking spaces in the Town-owned portion of the CVS lot. 1994 Annual Town Meeting appropriates \$20,000 for the machine, which is installed and operating by February 1995. Numerous other Commission recommendations result in improvements in the parking meter system.

Spring 1996 - Parking Commission - The Parking Commission urges the Town to proceed as quickly as possible to obtain funding, design and construct an off-street parking garage in the downtown. The Commission Chair communicates this recommendation to the Town Manager, who in turn requests assistance from Senator Stanley Rosenberg, Chair of the Massachusetts Senate Ways and Means Committee.

July 1996 - State Funds Become Available - Senator Rosenberg includes potential authorization for \$3 million for an Amherst parking garage in a state transportation bond. The Town must provide a 25% match to the funding, prepare plans and submit an application for funds to the state's Off-Street Parking Program.

October 1996 - Town Meeting authorizes \$15,000 to update design and cost estimates for a downtown parking garage. Discussions include desire to review site selection and assess parking demand.

Amherst Planning Department
Pros & Cons of 'CVS' as Site for Parking Structure*

PROS

- centrally located
 - close to many shops & services
 - serves the Jones Library
- good vehicular access
 - entry from main travel route & 2 alternative entry/exit pts.
 - simplest internal circulation
- few use conflicts
 - primarily compatible adjacent uses
 - minimal internal pedestrian/vehicular conflicts
- design flexibility & siting options
- not visibly intrusive from major travel routes
 - screened by other buildings and trees
- least expensive site to develop
 - land cost
 - Town owns portion of site
 - lower commercial market value
 - construction costs
 - minimal excavation & utility relocation
 - advantage of natural grade change an advantage
- eminent domain already approved by Town Meeting

CONS

- access limitations
 - narrow entry lane from North Pleasant Street
 - difficult exit intersection (Amity/North Prospect) due to offset with S. Prospect
- traffic impacts
 - turning into garage from N. Pleasant with existing heavy flow
 - increased traffic on Hallock and N. Prospect
- other conflicts
 - abuts established historic residential neighborhood
 - pedestrian/vehicular conflicts at N. Pleasant St. entry
- zoning change required (RG to BG)
- current parking demand for existing lot questioned, further study requested

* Sources: Reports listed in the Town Center Parking Report, 1996, Amherst Planning Department; overview of reports and events pertaining to parking in the Amherst Town Center; planning staff review of sites; and issues raised in public meetings in 1996.